

July 7, 2003: Africa: USCIRF letter to President Bush

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WASHINGTON-- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, has written to President Bush urging him to raise with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo the need to take action to end recent Muslim-Christian violence that threatens one of the most strategically important nations in Africa and to underscore with African leaders the importance of actively supporting a just peace in Sudan. "In Nigeria, recent Muslim-Christian violence that has killed thousands since 1999 and threatens to divide the country," said USCIRF Chair Felice D. Gaer. In its letter, the USCIRF states that the expansion of Islamic law (Sharia) into the criminal codes of several northern states in Nigeria has sparked much of the recent violence. "Some specific steps that President Bush could urge Nigerian President Obasanjo to take to reduce such violence include publicly condemning religious intolerance and bringing those responsible for communal violence to justice," said Ms. Gaer. In Sudan, African governments should use their influence with both parties to the conflict to urge compliance with commitments made as part of the ongoing peace negotiations. Earlier this year the USCIRF called for both Sudan and Nigeria to be placed on the U.S. list of "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act. The Administration has placed Sudan on that list and the President signaled that peace is a major priority. The text of the letter follows: Dear Mr. President, On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am writing to urge you to raise with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo the need to advance religious freedom in his country. We also urge that you raise with African leaders the importance of actively supporting a just peace in Sudan. In your recent speech to the Corporate Council of Africa, you said the United States will be "fully engaged in a broad, concerted effort to help Africans find peace, to fight disease, to build prosperity, and to improve their own lives." We wholeheartedly agree with these goals, but we also hope you will engage African leaders about the importance of protecting internationally recognized human rights, including religious freedom. These are critical foundations for securing real peace, stability, and democracy in Africa. In Nigeria, recent Muslim-Christian violence that has killed thousands since 1999 threatens to divide the country and undermine one of the most strategically important nations in Africa. The expansion of Islamic law (Sharia) into the criminal codes of several northern states has sparked much of the recent violence and places at risk the rights of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Presently, a woman convicted of adultery faces a sentence of death by stoning. A ban on alcohol sales, and gender segregation on public transportation, shows that at least some aspects of the new Sharia codes can be imposed on non-Muslims. In northern Nigeria, Christians report that they are hindered by local Muslim-controlled governments from building or repairing houses of worship and face official or officially sanctioned discrimination in the media, education, and participation in government. Muslim leaders in southern Nigeria, where Muslims are a minority, voice many of the same complaints. The Commission recommends that you urge Nigerian President Obasanjo to take the following steps to protect religious freedom and to reduce religious violence: Publicly and vigorously condemn religious intolerance and discrimination. Bring those responsible for communal violence to justice. Ensure that the recent expansion of Sharia-based criminal law does not apply to non-Muslims and respects the human rights, including religious freedom, of all individual Nigerians. Prevent law enforcement activities in northern states by any quasi-official or private corps of Sharia enforcers; and, Counter religiously-based discrimination by --investigating and removing legal obstacles to repairing places of worship; --providing religious instruction that does not compel any student with a religious objection to attend; --granting equal access to state-run radio and other government media sources for all religious groups. With regard to Sudan, the Commission urges you to encourage the African leaders with whom you meet to support the current Sudan peace process. Your Administration-- through your appointment in September 2001 of former Senator John Danforth as Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan and your signing in October 2002 of the Sudan Peace Act-- has signaled that peace in Sudan is a major priority for U.S. policy in Africa. African governments should use their influence with both parties to the conflict, the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, to urge compliance with commitments made as part of the ongoing peace negotiations. The human rights of all Sudanese must be protected from the horrific abuses that have characterized this conflict, including the Sudanese government's aerial bombardment of civilians and of humanitarian facilities, deliberate denial of international humanitarian assistance, abduction of women and children into conditions of slavery, and the forcible displacement of populations from oil-producing areas. Since Khartoum's effort to impose Islamic law on non-Muslim Sudanese has been a major factor in the conflict, African leaders should urge the Government of Sudan to accept the right to freedom of religion and belief of all Sudanese. We earnestly hope that your trip to Africa is successful. Sincerely, Felice D. Gaer Chair

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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